Relating the National Park Service to Gullah/Geechee Peoples and Cultures

If there is to be an involvement of the National Park Service in Gullah/Geechee society and culture, it must be in accordance with NPS standards and meet the criteria for national significance, suitability, and feasibility, as set forth in NPS Management Policies.

NPS Standards for National Significance, Suitability, and Feasibility

National Significance: According to these policies an area may be considered nationally significant only if it meets all the following criteria.

- Area is an outstanding example of a particular type of resource;
- Area possesses exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the natural or cultural themes of our nation's heritage;
- Area offers superlative opportunities for public enjoyment or scientific study;
- Area retains a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of a resource;
- In addition to the above criteria, an area that is determined to be nationally significant must also meet criteria for suitability and feasibility in order to qualify for potential inclusion in the park system;

Although the lands involved meet the above criteria, the people and their culture are the primary resource in this study. Data below will address both the people and their cultural landscape.

Suitability: An area is considered suitable for addition to the national park system if:

- It represents a natural or cultural resource type that is not already adequately represented in the national park system;
- It is not comparably represented and protected for public enjoyment by other federal agencies; tribal, state, or local governments; or the private sector.

Feasibility: To be feasible as part of the National Park System, an area must be of sufficient size and appropriate configuration, considering natural systems and/or historic settings to ensure sustainable protection of resources and to accommodate public use. The area must also have potential for efficient administration at a reasonable cost.

A number of factors are taken into consideration when assessing feasibility. Specific factors that are considered include:

- Current and potential uses of the study area and surrounding lands for preservation, interpretation, research, education, and recreation;
- Land ownership patterns within the proposed area;
- Current and potential threats to the cultural, natural, and historical resources;
- Degradation of existing resources;
- Staffing requirements to administer a new NPS unit or NPS partnered site;
- Local planning, land use, and zoning requirements in the study area;
- Level of both local and broader public support;
- Both economic and socio-economic impacts of a new unit designation to the national park system.

National Significance of the Gullah/Geechee People and Their Culture

The Gullah/Geechee people of the Low Country and Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina are a distinctive people. They are also the only African American population of the United States with a separate, long-standing name identifying them as a separate people. They are distinct among African American peoples in this development of a tradition that depends as much upon maritime resources as upon land resources. Historically they are speakers of the only true African American creole language of the continental United States.

Gullah/Geechee people are the most African of African Americans in physical type, language, and culture; yet they are a uniquely American cultural type formed by the fusion of African cultural heritage and American experience. Through the diffusion and expansion of their population, the Gullah/Geechee people have become the source for many elements noted in other African American cultures. Of all African American cultures in the United States, the folk customs, oral history and literature, crafts and arts of the Gullah/Geechee people show the strongest continuities with indigenous cultures of Africa. The Gullah/Geechee culture also bears strong similarities to creole and maroon cultures of the Caribbean.

In many respects the Gullah/Geechee cultural region directly parallels that of the Afro-Carib Garifuna people of Belize. The "cultural space" of these Garifuna people was selected in 2001 by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, a distinction for which the Gullah/Geechee people themselves might qualify (Global Garifuna Network, Electronic Document; UNESCO, Electronic Document).

Thus, Gullah/Geechee cultural heritage, eating habits, cooking styles, music, language and traditions have made significant contributions, not only to the lives of southerners but also to all Americans. Recognizing the pivotal place that Gullah/Geechee people, language, folklore, and culture have occupied in African American scholarship, the Special Resource Study team commissioned one of the most outstanding and erudite of African American scholars, Professor Richard Long of Emory University, to prepare a statement on the national significance of Gullah/Geechee culture. Dr. Long's statement follows.

Gullah Culture Special Resource Study

Statement of National Historical and Cultural Significance

The cultural group known as the Gullah/Geechee people are an African- descended American population associated geographically with off-shore islands (the Sea Islands) and coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia, an area which, particularly in South Carolina, is known as the Low Country. The Gullah area extends geographically, in the view of some observers to adjoining coastal areas of North Carolina and northern Florida, though a strong claim may be made only for the occasional presence of isolated Gullah clusters in the latter state.

Historically the Gullah area is associated prominently with, among others, the following South Carolina Islands: Johns, Wadmalaw, Edisto, St. Helena, Hilton Head; and the Georgia Islands: Tybee, Ossabaw, Sapelo, St. Simons, Jekyll, and Cumberland. The coastal cities of Charleston and Beaufort, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, have been the urban spaces which are considered integral to Gullah culture, and *entrepots*, sites of settlements and centers from which important influences have radiated.

The Gullah, long forming the bulk of the African American population in the geographical region delimited above, are coeval in historic depth with the earliest European Americans in the region. The plantation economy, the dominant social and economic matrix of the region, was initiated in the late seventeenth century by British immigrants from the Caribbean seeking to duplicate on the mainland the Barbadian enterprise. These immigrants brought in their trained enslaved Africans and subsequently fulfilled their increasing labor needs by further importations of enslaved Africans, both from the Caribbean and directly from Africa.

A number of factors gave rise in the eighteenth century to Gullah culture among the descendents of the enslaved Africans and successive waves of the newly enslaved. This culture has many distinctive traits, most dramatically a language, now recognized as a fully mature Creole language rather than a variety of "broken" English. The most prominent factor in the rise of Gullah culture was the relative isolation of the large African population which worked the plantations, producing successively sugar-cane, indigo, rice and cotton. Over a few generations the interactions among the Africans of various origins, and the relative sparseness of direct European intervention the process produced a viable neo-African culture. A description of the African origins of the Gullah population is provided in William Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1999); the processes by which the Gullah culture was created are detailed in Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

Gullah culture may be viewed usefully through three frames, the first a diasporic frame takes into account the Gullah and the plantation societies of the Caribbean; the second, a national frame, considers the Gullah in relation to wider plantation society in the United States; a third frame is the consideration of the Gullah as an autonomous group.

Within the diasporic frame many comparisons have been pursued. The development of Haitian peasant culture with its distinctive language (Haitian Creole), religious syncretism (vodun), burial customs, crafts, verbal arts—storytelling and proverbial discourse, offers an interesting but relatively unexplored parallel. The persistence of African folklore among the Gullah and in the Caribbean has been the subject of considerable inquiry beginning with the comparative researches of Elsie Clews Parsons, Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina (Cambridge: American Folklore Society, 1923) and extending to a recent study by Mella Davis, African Trickster Tales in Diaspora: Resistance in the Creole-Speaking South Carolina Sea Islands and Guadeloupe (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1998).

The diasporic perspective has been brought to bear most intensively on the study of the Gullah language, the first scientific study of which was Lorenzo Dow Turner's Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). A re-evaluation of Turner's work was undertaken by Michael Montgomery and others in The Crucible of Carolina: Essays in the Development of Gullah Language and Culture (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

The setting of Gullah culture within the national frame requires an overall concept of African American Culture which posits a folk-rural culture having been created in plantation America during the eighteenth century in the Upper South (Maryland and Virginia) and the Lower South (South Carolina and Georgia) and then extended with the extension of the plantation economy to the states of Louisiana Purchase, the Deep South (Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana) in the early nineteenth century. This folk-rural culture was characterized by a much more intimate contact between European and African Americas and consequently developed variations from European practices rather than stark contrasts with them: language, religion, musical practice, social structure, in the African American folk-rural may be regarded on a spectrum in which Gullah culture may be seen as a neo-African pole, the other pole being African Americans totally assimilated to European American norms.

With Abolition, there was begun a general migration toward cities, North and South, which produced an African American folk-urban culture. This trend was less profound among the Gullah, marking another distinction between them and larger African American culture.

As an autonomous group, the Gullah people, their culture, and their geographical setting have had an extended presence in the American mind, beginning with the work of South Carolina writer, William Gilmore Simms (see Nell Munroe Nixon, Gullah and Backwoods Dialect in Selected Works by William Gilmore Simms (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1971). Fanny Kemble's Residence on a Georgia Plantation, 1838-1839 (1963) provided a view of plantation life in the Gullah area at a crucial moment in American history. Yet another perspective on Gullah life was provided by the New England writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson in Army Life in a Black Regiment (1869).

The Sea Islands area was the site of an ambitious Abolitionist project at Port Royal, memorably chronicled by Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964). A classic of African American autobiography, The Journals of Charlotte Forten, edited by Ray Allen Billington (1953), provides a vibrant day-to-day account of the "experiment."

Delineations of the Gullah, the Sea Islands, and of Charleston interweave with the flowering of African American consciousness and cultural activity which occurred in the 1920's. In 1922, a racially insensitive compiler, Ambrose Gonzales, aroused interest with his folkloric collection The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast (Columbia, SC: State Publishing Company). Two South Carolina novelists emerge later in the decade: DuBose Heyward, author of Porgy (1925) and Julia Peterkin, author of Scarlet Sister Mary (1929). Porgy was successfully dramatized for Broadway. Scarlet Sister Mary received the Pulitzer Prize and was also dramatized, though less successfully. Porgy was transmuted into the Gershwin opera Porgy and Bess (1934), the best known of all American operatic works.

A culminating moment in the examination of Gullah culture was provided by a book which came out of the Georgia Writers Project of the 1930's; the African background of Gullah culture was highlighted through the autobiographical vignettes of Gullah life compiled in Drums and Shadows (1940). Coincident with the Black consciousness of the 1960's, and inspired both by Drums and Shadows and Turner's Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, a current of scholarship on the Gullah language began to flow which has continued until the present. In addition to the collective volume edited by Montgomery, already cited, another collected work has appeared: Sea Islands Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia edited by Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991). Individual and highly specialized studies have appeared. For Littlefield, Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slaves Trade in Colonial South Carolina (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU press, (1981) and two decades later, Judith Ann Carney, Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (2001).

The visualization of Gullah culture has been a continuing project beginning in the 1920's with the portrait sketches undertaken by Winold Reiss on St. Helena Island. More recent have been the photographic installations of Carrie Mae Weems, Sea Island Series (1992), the film, Daughters of the Dust (1991) by Julie Dash, and the paintings of Jonathan Green, published in Gullah Images (Columbia, South Carolina: USC Press, 1996).

It is of great interest to note that the broader African American culture is frequently characterized or represented by evidence from Gullah culture. One need look no further than the seminal collection of songs compiled primarily at Port Royal during the Civil War. Appearing in 1867 as Slave Songs of the United States, this work is the fount of the written tradition on African American folk music. Generalizations about African American folklore and folk life sometimes repose primarily on Gullah evidence. A consequence of this tendency is a penchant for asserting that somehow Gullah culture is more "authentic" or fundamental than other manifestations of African American culture.

Such a reading, of course, is a distortion of history and a disservice both to Gullah culture and to African American culture generally.

The Gullah world is a unique socio-cultural entity of intense historical and intellectual interest to scholars, artists, tourists and to those indigenous to that world. Its geographical extension and high profile sites such as Penn Center and the Charleston Market make the Gullah area an eminently feasible entity for public patronage and appreciation in a manner similar to other present and proposed National Park Service areas characterized by their embodiment of cultural history. The Gullah world provides an outstanding and indeed unique American example of an historical process, that of creolization as it is now understood by anthropology and linguistics. The Gullah area offers superlative opportunities for public use and enjoyment as well as for scientific study. The Gullah experience is an exceptional illustration of cultural creativity within the context of the American experience. The Gullah world manifests a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of an American resource.

A wide range of scholarly projects have addressed Gullah culture during the last half-century and a number of research institutions in Charleston and elsewhere have recently placed Gullah culture on their agenda. Nevertheless, a strong coordinating presence such as only the National Park Service can offer is necessary if the full value of these various endeavors is not to be dissipated, since these endeavors are dispersed over state boundaries and deployed in both private and public organisms. No entity comparable to Gullah culture is currently in or likely to be proposed to the National Park Service. – Richard A. Long

Suitability of the Gullah/Geechee Culture for NPS Interpretation

- Gullah/Geechee culture is not yet represented as its own entity in the national park system. Several existing sites tell a part of the story, but none has its main interpretive focus on this unique culture.

- The Gullah/Geechee story of slavery and its realities is uncomfortable for many people, regardless of race. School books have rarely presented the story in any semblance of its harsh reality. These captive African people were forcibly taken from their homeland, survived the treacherous Middle Passage, and sold into slavery. Thus, albeit unwittingly and without credit, they became major contributors to the economic success, infrastructure and cultural fabric of the states and nation. Their story must be told.

- The opportunity to interpret Gullah/Geechee culture within the NPS is timely, given the current interest in US/African affairs. Dr. Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor to the current administration, made the following statement on 3 July 2003, "…Africa is a part of America's history. You know, Europeans and Africans came to this country together – Africans in chains. Slavery was, of course, America's birth defect. And we've been trying to deal with the consequences of it ever since and to bring about reconciliation. The President on Goree Island is going to have a chance to talk about that experience, but also to look forward to the tremendous contributions of African Americans to this country. So America is a country of immigrants, but, of course, our experience with Africa has this other piece that wasn't exactly an immigrant experience. And yet it is the motherland, of course, a source of cultural pride for a substantial part of America's population."

- Historic sites of importance to the European settlers of the Low Country have been, for the most part, identified, mapped, and studied in great detail. Gullah/Geechee historic, archaeological, and cultural sites have not been so well documented and many are already lost.

- The Gullah/Geechee study area is an assemblage of rich and varied resources representing a unique aspect of coastal heritage and culture.

- The region reflects a complex mixture of people and their origins, traditions, customs, beliefs, and folkways of interest to the included states and to the entire nation.

- The coastal patterns of natural, estuarine, scenic, and cultural resource features, qualities, processes, uses, values, and relationships should be conserved.

- The Gullah/Geechee study team, with the advice of many people from the affected communities, has concluded that a wide array of themes and concepts can be developed and interpreted accurately and effectively through the proposed alternatives.

Feasibility of the Gullah/Geechee Culture for NPS Interpretation

The Gullah/Geechee culture, language, and lands are in imminent danger of loss to encroaching resort development, general coastal population growth, and the exit of their people for higher education and professional employment. In some cases tiny frame houses have been taxed at enormous rates due to their location on or near resort islands. Some historically Gullah/Geechee islands such as Hilton Head are almost totally lost to development. Other areas are losing ground by the day. Defining some means of preserving and interpreting this fragile culture is of the utmost urgency or all will be lost.

The feasibility of Gullah/Geechee sites within the NPS is greatly enhanced by the formation of partnerships with federal, state, and local entities within the region. The primary goal of these relationships would be to develop interpretive centers through the cooperative use of existing public lands.

These partnerships would serve to avoid expenditure of public funds for land acquisition, since the lands are already part of the public domain. Appropriated funds could be directed towards preservation, restoration, construction, and preservation of Gullah/Geechee history and culture.

In some cases NPS funds would be required to assist partners in the restoration and preservation of existing historic buildings. Additional funding might be required for such projects as upgrading interpretive brochures and exhibits to meet NPS standards. Staffing for these partnered sites could be shared among participating agencies. Projected visitation at these sites could lead to increased visitation at existing units of the National Park System within the area. All of the alternatives presented in this document would require funding; some more than others, but without land acquisition costs, the feasibility of all alternatives is greatly enhanced.